



DIY Enrichment Ideas – The HTDR Way

Many dogs enjoy putting both their minds and bodies to work for their meals rather than getting food for free. This instinct, known as *contrafreeloading*, means they find the “hunt” as rewarding as the food itself. You can nourish your dog’s brain as well as their body by skipping the traditional food bowl and using enrichment toys instead.

There are plenty of fun, commercially made food puzzles in all shapes, sizes, and textures, but you can also make your own at home with simple items you already have on hand. We’ve gathered ideas to help you get started so mealtime becomes both delicious and mentally stimulating for your pup. **NOTE: Always supervise the dog with these food puzzles, and use caution in multi-dog households by keeping dogs in separate rooms or similar while food/toys are hidden to prevent resource guarding.**

Pupsicles

Fill an ice cube tray or a muffin tin (depending on the dog’s size) with a few pieces of kibble/treats, then a wet food such as chicken broth, canned pumpkin, plain yogurt, or mashed banana, and then freeze it. Give your dog a “pupsicle” each day! Make multiple flavors to keep things interesting.

Have a ball (or several!)

Place treats covered by tennis balls/other balls into a muffin tin, where each ball has a treat hidden underneath it! For smaller dogs, use an egg carton in a similar way. Make sure the balls are always large enough to not pose a choking hazard.

Dig Pit

Dogs dig being able to dig! It’s a natural behavior for them, so why not encourage them to skip the flowerbeds by directing them to a more ideal space to dig? Create a digging pit for the dog that contains a variety of buried treasures such as toys and chewable treats hidden within it to make their pursuit for more fulfilling. You can create a dig pit in a portion of your yard or in a child’s sandbox or kiddie pool.

Variation: Indoor dig pit

For an indoor variation, build a treasure box with goodies for the dog to dig through and/or de-stuff. This could be a basket or bin that has dog chews, some treats, food puzzles, toys. Cover the goodies with blankets, sheets, towels, etc. to “up the challenge.”

Treasure hunt

You can create a treasure hunt or Easter egg hunt of sorts for your dog by hiding items for him to find, either inside the house, or in safe areas outside, such as a fenced-in yard or at the end of a long line, as long as the dog is supervised. Kibble, treats or toys can be scattered throughout the house or in an area of grass in the yard for the dog to discover.

SCENT-BASED IDEAS

One man’s trash...

Hide treats or kibble in containers that are in your recycling bin: cereal boxes, paper towel rolls, yogurt containers, plastic jars, boxes, etc. Plastics and cardboard work best. Make sure there are no sharp edges on any of the recyclables and stay away from tin cans or aluminum.

Multiple food bowls

If you are unable to purchase a food puzzle toy or a slow feeder bowl, you can simply use multiple bowls of any kind. Divide your dog’s regular meal into several small portions and “hide” them around the house for him to find. To make things more challenging, place blankets, pillow cases, sheets, or old t-shirts on top of them.

The magic cup

Try this fun game: place two to three plastic cups overturned on top of something your dog wants, like a treat. Then, mix up the cups (as a magician might!) and challenge your dog to “tell” you which cup the item of interest is hidden beneath. Note that your dog may “tell” you which cup with a gaze, their nose, or their paw. As soon as they focus in on one of the cups, overturn it to show what lies beneath. If they get it right, they immediately get the treat, plus an extra reward to reinforce their correct choice. If the dog gets it wrong, you can overturn that cup, show that it’s empty, and then overturn the cup that contains the treasure. To keep your dog from getting discouraged and giving up on the game initially, give him a treat anyway for trying. Then, once the dog is used to the game, you may opt to reward only the correct choice on the first try.

Stop and smell the roses

While out on a walk, giving your dog time to stop and smell the roses (or the bushes, grass patch, or fence post), is a way to engage their brain. More than moving long distances, dogs relish the chance to fully investigate and explore scents of interest. A limited space can still contain interesting smells that your dog enjoys. So, let your dog’s nose take the lead by allowing him to stop and fully investigate that smell before moving on.

Hide and Seek

“It’s Alive!” This is one is especially fun for kids to play! One person holds the dog while the other person hides. Hide behind a piece of furniture and call the dog to “find you” using a cue like “Where am I?” or “Come find me!” Make it very easy at first, so the dog can partially see you. Be sure to give the dog a treat each time he finds you. Gradually make it more challenging for your dog, hiding behind pieces of furniture/completely out of sight, and working up to eventually hiding behind a closed door (such as in a bathroom or bedroom). The more challenging the hide, the more the dog has to rely on his nose to find you. NOTE: If your dog has separation anxiety or is otherwise uncomfortable with being unable to find you, choose a different game

“It’s Alive”

Sometimes toys are much more interesting when they are “alive.” Take any stuffed dog toy and tie a long piece of rope around it to create an animated/moving toy for the pet to chase or follow. You could also use a long line, or even a leash instead of rope. Think of yourself as the puppeteer as you move the toy, sometimes slowly and sometimes in swift, jerking motions back and forth – depending on what catches your dog’s interest. How slowly or quickly you move the toy to entice the dog will vary by individual



“Find It”

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Teach your dog to “find it” with pieces of food. Let him see you toss a piece of food close by and ask him to “find it.” When he does, he immediately gets rewarded by eating it. Gradually toss the food farther and farther, so the dog has to chase it. Then make it more challenging by hiding the food in a box or under a towel or sheet. As the dog learns what “find it” means, his excitement for the game will build, and so will his willingness to work a little harder to find the food.

Ride along

If your dog is limited from physical activity, he may still be able to enjoy the sights, sounds, and smells of the outside world if you give him extra assistance. Depending on the dog’s needs, size and comfort level, he may be able to enjoy a venture outside in the comfort of a doggy stroller, wagon, or by being carried in a wearable sling or pack.

Or, the ride along your dog enjoys might actually be from the seat of the car, with a safety harness on and the windows rolled down, to allow your dog to enjoy the incoming scents and interesting sights as you drive.